

Brave Wanderers give Charlton's men the shock of their lives

"NO HOPE" outsiders Wycombe Wanderers came so close to pulling off one of the biggest shocks in the history of the F.A. Cup on Saturday. With a shade more luck — a matter of inches on two occasions — the Blues could have clinched their most memorable victory ever.

In the end they finished with a memorable 0-0 draw with one of the best teams in the country — joint Division One leaders Middlesbrough — having given them one of their toughest games for a long time.

Before this game, which had attracted more interest and publicity than any other in the club's 90 years, Wycombe were written off by almost everyone. That included their manager, Brian Lee, who had stated: "We've got no chance."

But from the very first whistle, the players, many of whom had said they, at least, felt they had a chance, fought like tigers throughout the game to finish with far more credit than their celebrated opponents.

I have never seen such sheer effort from a team before. Everyone gave 110 per cent, working for each other and bringing the reward of the club's best ever performance in the F.A. Cup. It was a fitting display to mark their first third round match.

With a shade more luck the champagne afterwards could have tasted that much sweeter. For Wanderers twice could have snatched a goal which, on the day, looked enough to clinch the verdict. The reason they didn't was due mainly to Middlesbrough's two towering central defenders Stuart Boam and Willie Maddren. These two limited Wycombe to only a handful of chances.

Whether the Blues can pull off a victory at Ayresome Park tonight (Tuesday) remains to be seen. I said before Saturday's historic game that the result was immaterial. The same applies. Wycombe Wanderers have thrilled thousands with their F.A. Cup feats this season — as the 12,000 fans on Saturday will testify.

To pick out individuals in a superb team performance might seem unfair but four men do deserve special mention. Blues' centre-back Keith Mead looked every bit as good as his opposite number Maddren on the day while full-back Paul Birdseye will not play a better game all season. In midfield Terry Reardon frustrated danagerman Graeme Souness constantly and played a key role in clinching the draw. Up front Steve Perrin excelled, looking the most dangerous forward on the field.

But it wasn't just these who made Saturday such a tremendous occasion. Everyone deserves praise. The officials, the magnificent crowd and of course, those 12 men in blue who fought throughout the 90 minutes.

With the crowd gathering well before the early kick-off time of 2 o'clock, there was almost a full house to see Blues' boss Brian Lee receive the 'Bucks Free Press Killer Cup', to mark the occasion of Wycombe's first third round match in 90 years. Jack Charlton, Middlesbrough's manager, made the presentation. Soon afterwards, with London Weekend Television's

cameras stationed at various points around Loakes Park, the team came out to a tumultuous reception.

Club chairman Jack Smethurst, in Wycombe General Hospital, was saluted by his players as they lined up on the half-way line and as both sides warmed up, the actual size

surprised by Wycombe's adventurous play, decided on safety-first at all costs. Passing back to Platt whenever danger threatened, they took no chances whatsoever. I lost count of how many times the ball was booted out of play by the defenders.

This defensive attitude won

ferently and with this vocal support, the players went from strength to strength.

The tremendous ovation given to Wycombe when referee Porter blew the half-time whistle was richly deserved. The home team had done better than many expected not only holding Middlesbrough to 0-0, but

form, it looked likely that only a mistake would give Wycombe their deserved breakthrough. That error never came.

There were the odd moments of danger in the 'Boro area, though, with Perrin and Birdseye both going close. And when one attack broke down, another was formed almost immediately. It was this constant flow that brought the taunts of 'Easy! Easy!' from the crowd.

There was very little the visitors could do about it. With Reardon everywhere in midfield, Souness had an uncomfortable afternoon and as Middlesbrough began playing more and more defensively, they presented Wycombe with more and more time and space. The Blues, in fact, had more of both these commodities than would normally be expected in a league game.

But the question of breakthrough was still very much in the mind. Just how much Wycombe to get through that mass of red shirts? Phillips almost found the answer in the 70th minute — the closest Wycombe came to a goal.

Spraggon brought down Perrin in desperation on the top wing for a free-kick. Wycombe's two centre-backs came up for the set piece and as Reardon's kick came over Phillips raced in at the far post. Alan got full power behind his far post header but John Hickton's pressure made all the difference between a goal and the close shave that resulted. Platt, helpless in the middle of his goal, would have stood no chance had the ball gone six inches the other way.

After that, Middlesbrough virtually shut shop for good and their intention was clear — survival at all costs. The lonely figure of John Maskell stood and watched as his team-mates piled on further pressure without reward. Middlesbrough just soaking up the attacks time and again, by now playing a 5-5-0 formation.

Middlesbrough won only their second corner of the half in the 83rd minute (Wanderers had amassed six by then) but the danger was cleared and then three minutes later, 'Boro almost snatched what would have been one of the travesties of the season. Hickton's high thump upfield bounced on the edge of the area as Mead and substitute Willey chased back. Willey, who had come on earlier for the out-of-touch Foggon, poked a boot at the ball as Maskell hesitated. The goalkeeper managed to recover the ball but then lost it and only a relieving boot saved the day for Wanderers.

That proved to be the final chance of the game. Dylan Evans replaced Horseman with two minutes to go. "Bodger" receiving deserved applause for a skilled performance and when that final whistle was blown, there were no doubts as to the most relieved side on the field.

Wycombe Wanderers had been expected to lose bravely, perhaps two or three nil. Here they were with an incredible goalless draw to their credit. After that performance, no one could have asked for more.

WYCOMBE WANDERERS: J. Maskell; P. Birdseye, K. Mead, A. Phillips, G. Hand; M. Holfield, T. Reardon, H. Kennedy; A. Horseman (sub: D. Evans 88 mins.), K. Searle, S. Perrin.

MIDDLESBROUGH: J. Platt; J. Craggs, W. Maddren, S. Boam, F. Spraggon; S. Brine, G. Souness, D. Armstrong, J. Hickton; A. Foggon (sub: A. Willey 80 mins.), D. Mills.

Referee: A. Porter (Bolton). Official attendance: 12,000.

Wycombe Wanderers 0, Middlesbrough 0 STUART EARP AT LOAKES PARK

of the Middlesbrough men really began to sink in. There was the massive captain Boam, who, compared with Tony Horseman looked like Goliath. There was the broad John Craggs who seemed at least twice as wide as Blues' full-back Gary Hand.

When the match got under way, the size difference scarcely mattered. From the kick-off, Wanderers, showing few signs of Big Match nerves, began chasing and harassing their opponents.

Limiting Middlesbrough's time and space, the home players nearly always made themselves first to the ball with skipper Alan Phillips setting a prime example to his men.

In the opening minutes Phillips gave away a corner but when Wanderers broke out after Frank Spraggon's poor flag kick and strung three passes together at speed, they were well and truly in the game. It seemed the home side were hell-bent on not only containing the opposition, but playing their best football too. They succeeded beyond their wildest dreams.

Their confidence was boosted even further in the fourth minute. Perrin beat Spraggon for the first of many times and squared the ball to Reardon. He sent Birdseye racing through and Paul's firmly struck shot flew just wide of Jim Platt's upright.

Middlesbrough, no doubt

'Boro few friends at Loakes Park. I, like many, had expected to see a top First Division side in action. We expected at least some flair in attack and some invention from midfield. But such was the Wanderers work rate, the visitors just didn't have time to entertain at all.

One man who looked likely to test Wanderers was their top striker Alan Foggon. He got himself into scoring positions often in the early stages but his finishing was disappointing. And with Wycombe — Birdseye in particular — breaking up their raids with fine tackling and a string of interceptions, it was the Blues who stole the initiative.

A corner on the bottom flank almost brought a goal after 19 minutes. Howard Kennedy drilled a firm kick right into the heart of the 'Boro box and Platt was in real trouble fisting the ball off his line as the strikers closed in. Foggon replied with a surging run of 20 yards right down the middle but John Maskell, who must have had his quietest afternoon for a long time, dived to take the difficult bounce well.

Wanderers were unperturbed. Maddren had to thump the ball clean over the bottom stand in the 25th minute, then seconds later Kennedy volleyed over the top and Reardon flashed in a drive which was blocked by Boam. These brave efforts had the crowd roaring their side on

testing them with brave attacking football.

Any fears that Wycombe would have burnt themselves out after that first half performance, were soon dispelled when they resumed their all-out attack from the restart.

In only the second minute of the new half Searle sent Mick Holfield racing down the flanks. Mick's pace took him clear of Peter Brine and his low cross to the near post had 'Boro really stretched. Perrin swooped in with a defender but the ball ended up just the wrong side of the post. Three minutes later Kennedy set up Perrin on the flank and after beating Spraggon, Steve crossed low and hard into the box. Catching the Middlesbrough defence wrong-footed the ball fell right into Holfield's path and his vicious first-time drive flew into the crowd. Had the shot been on target, Platt would have known very little about it.

Wanderers, by now, were playing with real confidence. Instead of hammering the ball clear, the defence layed off some fine passes to the midfield men and maintained the pressure on Middlesbrough.

Unfortunately for Wycombe, Boam and Maddren were giving nothing away. Neither made an expensive error all afternoon while the burly Craggs rarely missed a tackle on the flanks. With these players in such fine

WYCOMBE FLY UP FOR THE REPLAY

CUP heroes Wycombe Wanderers flew up to Teesside Airport last night (Monday) for their third round replay with Middlesbrough. And before he left, manager Brian Lee reported a full strength squad for the game.

But once again, Brian maintained his team had no chance for the game. "I can't see that we have any chance at all," he said. "Professionals play a different game at home and I think we'll probably get 'murdered'. They didn't play as well as expected on Saturday. We didn't allow them to play. But it will be different tomorrow."

The Blues flew up from Heathrow yesterday evening but will be making the return trip by coach, arriving back about 5 a.m. This morning they trained at Middlesbrough's training ground, having spent the night at a Teesside hotel.

Jack Charlton, who expressed his relief after drawing Saturday's intriguing encounter, will not select his team until shortly before the kick off.

Middlesbrough have one injury worry. David Mills, the England Under 23 international, strained an old calf injury at Loakes Park and is rated as doubtful. Peter Brine, who came into the side for the suspended Bobby Murdoch on Saturday, may also lose his place after a poor performance. Boro may move John Hickton to midfield and bring in Peter Willey (Saturday's substitute) up front.

Although Middlesbrough are expecting a 25-30,000 crowd tonight, Wanderers are sure to be well represented. Yesterday, four coaches were already booked up with several others available while many supporters will make the five hour journey by car.